

## Resurrection Sunday

### Introduction

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the “happy ending” of which all other “happy endings” are at best feeble imitations – if not counterfeit substitutes. Who doesn’t like a happy ending – especially, a *true* happy ending? And yet there’s something about the resurrection of Jesus Christ—for all its happiness and joy—that many find to be offensive. The **very thing** that makes the resurrection the happiest of all endings is also the **very thing** that explains why so many people reject it – why deep down there are many who don’t *want* it to be true. Ask yourself this morning on this Easter Sunday, “Are you one of those people, deep down, who don’t want it to be true?” And if so, *why*?

You see, when it comes to a historical account as awesome as the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it’s impossible to be ambivalent towards it, or to remain neutral. One either rejects it because he doesn’t want it to be true, or else he believes it joyfully because he knows with all his heart that it *must* be true – that at the end of the day it’s the only “happy ending” there is. This morning, which one are you? Which one will you be?

### The “Law” of Death

One of the most fundamental “burdens” of God’s Word is to explain to us where death came from. God said to Adam and Eve:

- Genesis 2:15–17 — You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

Life is the gift of God. All life finds its ultimate source in God. So when man *rejects* God—when we rebel against God’s holy law—the consequence of that rejection must, “*naturally*,” be death. Death is “only” the *natural consequence* of our sin. But death is also more than that; it’s the *righteous judgment* of God upon us as sinners. The message of the Bible is simple: Adam and Eve sinned; and so they died.

- Genesis 5:3–5 — When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he fathered Seth were 800 years; and he had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, **and he died**.

Throughout the rest of this genealogy we hear the refrain repeated over and over again, “and he died... and he died... and he died... and he died.” Only, at one point in the midst of all these notices of death, we have this sudden exception:

- Genesis 5:21–24 — When Enoch had lived 65 years, he fathered Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all

the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.

One “exception” in an otherwise endless litany of death. Enoch, too, was a sinner, because the Bible says that “**all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23) Enoch, too, deserved the refrain, “and he died,” because the Bible says that “the wages of sin is death.” (Rom. 6:23) And yet, it is *not* said that Enoch died, but rather: “he was not, for God took him.” It’s as if, for a moment, the law of gravity was temporarily suspended or reversed – only it’s even more “impossible” than that. According to the Bible, there is no law more basic or fundamental—more unchanging and irreversible—than this one: “Where there is sin, there must always be death.”

- Romans 5:12 — Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.

If we die, then it’s *because* we’ve sinned – it’s because death is what we’ve deserved. We try to ignore death and look the other way. But it’s still there, and we can’t escape its reality. We try to call death a natural and good part of the cycle of life. But it’s not. The Bible tells us it’s not, and we all know it deep down. Or, we try to comfort ourselves with the hope that God will overlook our faults because of the good things we’ve done, and so reward us with some happy life in some “heaven” of our own invention. But the very fact of death should warn us that this *can’t* be true.

If we’ve deserved physical death (and we’ll all find out one day that we have), that’s the ultimate *evidence* that we’ve all also deserved what the Bible calls the “second death” – everlasting separation from God in the torment and “outer darkness” of hell, **away** from the life-giving, joy-giving, light-giving presence of God. You see, hell is not the sadistic invention of a sadistic God. Cut off from every last vestige of the presence of God, hell is all there is. Hell is “only” the *natural consequence* of our sin and rebellion against God. But hell is also more than that; it’s the *righteous judgment* of God upon us as sinners. The worst reality of the first death—our physical death—is how it points to the second death:

- Hebrews 9:27 — It is appointed for man to die once, and *after that* comes judgment.

According to the Bible, there is no law more basic or fundamental—more unchanging and irreversible—than this one: “Where there is sin, there must always be death.” If we’ve already deserved the first death, how can we possibly think that we haven’t deserved the hell that comes after?

### **The “Law” and Gift of Blood Sacrifice**

From the very earliest days of man, we have the story of blood sacrifices. On the very first pages of the Bible, we find Abel bringing a sacrifice from the firstborn of his flock. (Gen. 4:4) After the flood:

- Genesis 8:20 — Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar.

We read the same thing of Abraham (Gen. 22:13), and then also of Jacob (Gen. 46:1). When God sent Moses to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt, He gave him these instructions:

- Exodus 3:18 — [You] shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, "...Please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God."

Of course, the assumption, here, is that the king of Egypt knew all about sacrifice. Blood sacrifice was an almost universal part of the ancient world. Why? Because it had come down to the people from the very first days of man. However, as people had continued to rebel against God, they had twisted and perverted sacrifice into the polar opposite of what it was supposed to be.

The pagans sacrificed in order to appease the gods – gods who were arbitrary, fickle, unpredictable, and even "needy," competing among themselves for supremacy. To "appease" these gods with blood sacrifices was ultimately a constant attempt at manipulation and bribery.

But in the Bible, the God who requires sacrifice is not in competition—or even in partnership—with any other. Instead, He is proclaimed to be the **only true** and **living** God.

- Isaiah 45:5 — I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God.
- Psalms 103:19 — The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

The God of the Bible is almighty and supreme, ruling over all. What, then, could this one and only true God "*need*" or "*want*" with sacrifice?

In the Bible, the God who requires sacrifice is not arbitrary, or fickle, or unpredictable. Instead, He is proclaimed to be the God who is always the same – who is always unfailingly true to His own unchanging character.

- Malachi 3:6 — I the LORD do not change.
- Numbers 23:19 — God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?
- Psalms 102:25–27 — Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain... they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end.

How could anyone ever presume to think that his sacrifice would have any influence or effect on this God – this God who never changes, who is always the same, and who always does exactly as He has said?

In the Bible, the God who requires sacrifice is not needy in any way or lacking in anything. Instead, He is wholly self-sufficient – not dependent upon anyone or anything outside of Himself. The Psalmist acknowledges:

- Psalm 90:2 — Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
- Exodus 3:14 — God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM... Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

And later, in the book of Revelation:

- Revelation 1:8 — “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

What, then, could this only true and living God, who is unchanging and always the same, and wholly, eternally self-sufficient ever possibly “need” with man’s sacrifices? Obviously, the answer must be – “**nothing**.” What kind of manipulating “influence” or “effect” could any kind of sacrifice ever have on *this* God? Obviously, the answer must be – “**none at all**.”

- Psalm 50:7–15 — “Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?”

In the Bible, the whole reason and rationale for sacrifices everywhere else in the ancient world is totally obliterated. So, then, what *reason* for animal blood sacrifices could possibly remain? What possible reason could there be for the unchanging, self-sufficient, almighty God of the Bible to require such a thing?

There is no law more basic or fundamental—more unchanging and irreversible—in all the world than this one: “Where there is sin, there must always be death.” We cannot escape the reality that if we die physically, it’s only because we’ve earned it; and if we’ve earned the first death, then we’ve also earned and deserved the “second death” – to be cut off forever from the life-giving, joy-giving, light-giving presence of God in the outer darkness and torment of hell. It’s only in the light of this law of sin and death that we can begin to understand the **only possible** reason in the Bible for sacrifice.

We didn’t invent the idea of sacrifice as something we could “use” to *make* God favorable to us! God is the one who *first gave* sacrifice to His people because He *already* loved them, and because He already desired *their* good – that they should live and not die. Because God *already* loved His people, He gave them a **substitute** – the death of another **in the place** of His people. This is the total, polar opposite of pagan sacrifice! This is pagan sacrifice turned completely and totally on its head – inside out, and upside down. And so the Lord God says to His people in Leviticus seventeen:

- Leviticus 17:11 — The life of the flesh is in the blood, and **I have given it for you on the altar** to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

So we can picture the scene: A man becomes aware of some sin that he has committed – this single sin reminding him that he’s a sinner through and through, deserving of death. So what does he do? He doesn’t hatch a scheme to try and manipulate God into being favorable and forgiving. Instead, he rejoices that God has already, in His love and favor, provided the blood on the altar as a substitute for his own. And so he goes to the flock and takes an animal, and brings it to the altar, and lays his hand on the head of the animal, and then kills the animal himself, after which the priest takes some of the blood of the animal and applies it to the altar, and then pours out all the rest at the base of the altar. (cf. Lev. 4:27-30) As the guilty man identifies himself with the slain animal, he rejoices in God’s merciful and gracious word: “The life of the flesh is in the blood, and **I have given it for you on the altar** to make atonement for your souls.”

Today, we like to think that as a “civilized” people we’ve evolved beyond the primitive idea of blood sacrifice. But that’s not the message of the Bible. The message of the Bible is that without blood sacrifice, we all die. The message of the Bible is that the God who is holy and wrathful against sin has graciously given the blood on the altar to His people because He loved them – because He desired that they should live, and *not* die.

### **The RESURRECTION and Christ’s “Once for All” Sacrifice**

But it was clear, all along, that an animal could not, *finally*, be the substitute for guilty human beings. Otherwise, these animals would have stopped being offered. The blood of the animals on the altar was really only a constant witness to the people of their need for another sacrifice – a different, and a better sacrifice. (cf. Heb. 10:1-4) In fact, there were many, many sins for which, at the end of the day, there was no sacrifice provided. When King David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and conspired to have her husband killed, he could only pray with these words:

- Psalm 51:16–17 — You will not delight in [animal] sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

David believed that God would never have given his people the blood on the altar if He did not mean to provide them, in the end, with a better sacrifice. Do you know what this is? This is faith that God can do the impossible. David’s confidence that God would not despise a “broken and contrite heart” wasn’t just a sentimental, optimistic feeling. It could only, finally be rooted in his confidence that one day a different, and a better blood sacrifice would be provided by God – and that he would provide this precisely *because He already* loved us; because it was His loving purpose that we should live, and not die. David knew that God’s gift of blood on the altar was the constant guarantee that one day, sin and death would be wholly defeated and conquered by life.

Would this not be the ultimate “happy ending”? Would this not be, at the end of the day, the *only real* “happy ending”? And if *not this*, then what other happy ending could possibly exist in this world?

Well, if a sacrificial animal cannot, finally, be the substitute for guilty human beings, then what—or who—can? Think about that for a moment. For thousands of years there was no

suitable substitute in sight – there was no such sacrificial victim to be found, *anywhere*. Very simply, such a one didn't exist – *until* that moment in history when God the Son came into this world as **one of us**, partaking of flesh and blood—of real and true humanity—so that *He* might taste death *for us all*. (cf. Heb. 2:9, 14) Why did He come? He came – to be – our sacrifice.

- Hebrews 10:5–7 — Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings [of animals] you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

Jesus said, one day, to His disciples:

- John 10:18 — No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

And so He did. In His own time and His own way, and in perfect obedience to the Father almost two thousand years ago, Jesus offered up Himself as a blood sacrifice – the different and better blood sacrifice without which every single one of us here would be doomed to eternal death.

But just as we're about to rejoice, we wonder. Death can't possibly be the happy ending. Death cannot, in the end, be defeated and conquered... *by death*. So how can we *know* that God has accepted Christ's sacrifice on behalf of all His people? How can we *know* that the sacrifice of Christ has truly availed—powerfully availed—for us?

Oh Church! **This** is what Resurrection Sunday is all about!!! It is the ultimate, and the *only* happy ending It's the ultimate and final **proof** that the sacrifice of Christ *has* been accepted in our stead. It's the ultimate and final proof that because of His shed blood, we will not ultimately die, but live. Over and over again throughout the book of Acts, the Apostles are at pains to point out this single, great reality:

- Acts 13:29–30 (cf. 2:23-24; 3:14-15; 4:10; 10:39-40) — When they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. **But God raised him from the dead...**

Proving that His death was not for any sin of His own, but for ours, and therefore also proving once and for all that His death has, indeed, availed—powerfully, and completely, and finally—for us!

Indeed, it wasn't enough for Christ to die, and His blood to be shed. Even in the Old Testament, on the Day of Atonement, it wasn't enough for the *animal* to die and its blood to be shed. The blood of the animal had to be brought by the High Priest into the earthly temple, all the way into the Most Holy Place, and applied to the Mercy Seat over the Ark of the Covenant. So also, the atoning, cleansing, sanctifying, saving value of Christ's shed blood and sacrificial death **had to be** eternally represented and held forth on our behalf in the holy places of heaven itself – in the temple not made with hands. But who could do such a thing? What High Priest of the sons of Aaron could ever stand in the holy places of heaven, representing *forever* before God the infinite atoning value of Christ's sacrifice for sinners? There was none. The resurrection of Jesus is not

only the proof that His blood sacrifice has availed for us, but also the guarantee that it will continue to avail forever, and ever, and ever, to all eternity. He rose from the dead to do what no other earthly high priest could do. He rose from the dead to represent, *forever*, in the holy places of heaven the infinite saving power of His sacrificial death for all those He came to save.

- Hebrews 9:24–26 — For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.
- Hebrews 7:23–25 — The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

### Conclusion

The **very thing** that makes the resurrection the happiest of all endings is also the **very thing** that explains why so many people reject it – why deep down there are many who don't *want* it to be true. The resurrection is the happy ending to a story of sin and guilt and judgment and death. The resurrection is proof that the blood sacrifice of Christ was **necessary** in order for guilty sinners like us to be saved. And so the resurrection of Christ loudly proclaims that for all of us who believe, our lives can no longer be our own, but His – who died, and now lives again, for us.

When it comes to a historical account as awesome as the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it's impossible to be neutral. One either rejects it because he doesn't want it to be true, or else he believes it joyfully because he knows with all his heart that it *must* be true – that at the end of the day it's the only “happy ending” there is. This morning, which one are you? Which one will you be?

- Romans 10:9, 11 — If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.”